



IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH & WELFARE**

**News Release**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
June 29, 2007

Tom Shanahan  
(208) 334-0668

**An Increase of *E. coli* Cases Raises Concern in Idaho**

The Department of Health and Welfare is announcing a rise in *E. coli* O157:H7 cases in Idaho in June, and is advising citizens to be aware of ways to decrease their risk.

“We are seeing clusters of illness in families and communities across southern Idaho”, said Dr. Christine Hahn, state epidemiologist. “In some cases, it is unclear how the disease has spread, but in some cases, exposure to potentially contaminated food or water may be to blame.” Although summer often brings a rise in foodborne and waterborne illness, Dr. Hahn reminded citizens that there is much they can do to prevent themselves and their families from getting ill.

During the month of May, five cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 were reported, but in June, 12 cases have already been reported to the state health department, with others under investigation.

*Escherichia coli* O157:H7 is a leading cause of foodborne illness. Based on a 1999 estimate, 73,000 cases of infection and 61 deaths occur in the United States each year. Last year, 55 cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 were reported in Idaho.

Infection with *E. coli* often leads to bloody diarrhea, and occasionally to kidney failure. People can become infected with *E. coli* O157:H7 in a variety of ways. Though most illness nationwide has been associated with eating undercooked, contaminated ground beef, people have also become ill from eating contaminated bean sprouts or fresh leafy vegetables such as lettuce and spinach. Person-to-person contact in families and child care centers is also a known mode of transmission. In addition, infection can occur after drinking raw milk and after swimming or playing in contaminated pools, waterparks, rivers or lakes, or drinking contaminated water.

**(more)**

**To reduce risk of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection, consumers should:**

- **Cook all ground beef and hamburger thoroughly.** Because ground beef can turn brown before disease-causing bacteria are killed, use a digital instant-read meat thermometer to ensure thorough cooking. Ground beef should be cooked until a thermometer inserted into several parts of the patty, including the thickest part, reads at least 160° F. Persons who cook ground beef without using a thermometer can decrease their risk of illness by not eating ground beef patties that are still pink in the middle.
- **If you are served an undercooked hamburger or other ground beef product in a restaurant, send it back for further cooking.** You may want to ask for a new bun and a clean plate, too.
- **Avoid spreading harmful bacteria in your kitchen.** Keep raw meat separate from ready-to-eat foods. Wash hands, counters, and utensils with hot soapy water after they touch raw meat. Never place cooked hamburgers or ground beef on the unwashed plate that held raw patties. Wash meat thermometers in between tests of patties that require further cooking.
- **Drink only pasteurized milk, juice, or cider.** Commercial juice with an extended shelf-life that is sold at room temperature (e.g. juice in cardboard boxes, vacuum sealed juice in glass containers) has been pasteurized, although this is generally not indicated on the label. Juice concentrates are also heated sufficiently to kill pathogens.
- **Wash fruits and vegetables under running water, especially those that will not be cooked.** Be aware that bacteria are sticky, so even thorough washing may not remove all contamination. Remove the outer leaves of leafy vegetables. Children under 5 years of age, immunocompromised persons, and the elderly should avoid eating alfalfa sprouts until their safety can be assured. Persons at high risk of complications from foodborne illness may choose to consume cooked vegetables and peeled fruits.
- **Drink municipal water that has been treated with chlorine or another effective disinfectant.**
- **Avoid swallowing water while swimming or playing in recreational water including interactive fountains and water parks.**
- **Avoid swimming in irrigation canals.**
- **Wash your hands thoroughly after coming in contact with animals in petting zoos, fairs, and farms.**
- **Make sure that persons with diarrhea, especially children, wash their hands carefully with soap after bowel movements to reduce the risk of spreading infection, and that persons wash hands after changing soiled diapers.** Anyone with a diarrheal illness should avoid swimming in public pools or lakes, sharing baths with others, and preparing food for others.

###

**(Editors: For more information, please contact IDHW Public Information Officer Tom Shanahan at 334-0668, or your District Health Department Public Information Officer.)**